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Challenging the grammar of difference: Benoy Kumar Sarkar, global mobility and anti-imperialism around the First World War

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ABSTRACT

The new imperial history has advanced our understanding of empires in many ways: it enhanced a networked interpretation of empires, brought space back into the discussion, and suggested a fresh reading of imperial careers to comprehend early forms of global interdependencies. This article discusses selected aspects of the life and work of Benoy Kumar Sarkar (1887–1949), a Bengali social scientist and political activist, to illustrate that anti-imperial biographies were simultaneously rooted in local as well as transnational spaces. They thus connected national struggles with globe-spanning processes. Biographies like this are underacknowledged in their meaning for how empires functioned and failed, and in their potential for understanding transnational actors. Sarkar's efforts to challenge the legitimacy of the British Empire were the result of his life in a transnational social field, which was equally shaped by his extensive experience abroad and his continuous rootedness in local Bengali affairs. Sarkar's anti-imperialism was enhanced by the mobility structures of the British Empire and resulted in new constellations of imperial, cosmopolitan, local and regional orientations and attachments. In this view, anti-imperialism was less the result of local struggles but of life practices reaching beyond the borders of the empire and a high awareness of acting in a global context that located its protagonists in numerous social and spatial contexts.

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Understanding empires through anti-imperial biographies

In this article I discuss selected aspects of the life and work of Benoy Kumar Sarkar (1887–1949), a Bengali social scientist and political activist who left India for several years on the eve of the First World War to become a leading anti-imperial intellectual with a global outlook. Anti-imperial biographies have so far been an under-acknowledged source to analyse the functioning, as well as the failure, of empires in an evolving transnational context. My theoretical concern thereby is to address some of the shortcomings within the field of the

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new imperial history, but also to reinforce some of its merits in order to re-evaluate the significance of transnational actors in this research field.

The new imperial history has challenged and thereby deepened our historical understanding of modern empires in many important ways. Most importantly, scholars in this field have suggested analysing empires not mainly along the dichotomy of core and periphery, that is, the sharp distinction between commanding and subordinated territories, but instead focus more on the reciprocity of non-Western and European societies. As important as power hierarchies and social cleavages have been in the relationships between colonizers and the colonized, life realities in the colonies, as well as in the European metropolitan areas, have been more complex and often more integrated.

To better understand how these diverse facets of social interaction, mutual dependency, intimate closeness and social division evolved, the new imperial history enhances a networked interpretation of empire as an integrated and interconnected space.¹ In this view, modern empires were constituted by numerous, mainly urban, nodal points. Particularly since the second half of the nineteenth century, these nodal points intensified communication and transfer among themselves, within their respective hinterland, and across imperial borders.² Relations of dominance and marginalization between these nodes were not fixed, but stretched in temporary configurations across the whole geographical scope of empires.³ What this change in perspective claims, however, is that there has never been a single European colonial project or a single colonial discourse but rather a sum of diverse colonial interests that frequently contradicted each other.

The new imperial history also proves useful in addressing the relative neglect of space and its relevance to understanding historical change, which until recently formed a deficit in imperial, as well as other subfields, of history.⁴ For various reasons historians have for a long time favoured temporality over spatiality. But because many modern empires are per se transnational structures, scholars of imperialism experimented with new ways of bringing space back into the discussion. Imperial elites were driven by an awareness of the regional, or even the global, spread of their empires, via the 'conquered' spaces beyond their societies of origin. As part of this process they imposed their own cartographies and ethnological categories unto the colonized population.⁵ The space of an empire was, however, not only something to appropriate or travel across; it was also a factor that defined, created and sustained cultural, social and political relations.⁶ Bureaucrats in the colonies, administrators in the European metropolitan areas, or anti-colonialists travelling abroad, sustained different social relationships within multiple geographies. In different places, these people were confronted with various forms of globalization, changing imperial power interests and specific features of locality which provided an ever-evolving framework for their thoughts and actions. These 'shifting geographies'⁷ are being increasingly discovered by historians as contested sites which co-determined the rise and decline of empires in many fascinating ways.

Finally, the new imperial history redraws scholarly attention to biographies as lenses through which broader patterns of historical change can be illustrated and explained. More recent forms of biography-writing emphasize less the life path of the coherent, unified self, but instead stress the composed, multifaceted, contingent and thus contradictory nature of individual personality.⁸ This trend is also relevant for imperial history.

Empires constituted as networks were to an important extent the result of imperial elites who, for the most part, were educated in their countries of origin, left for their postings

abroad and were thus exposed to various colonial localities and their changing cultural, socio-economic and political peculiarities. These mobile imperial careerists mediated, negotiated and translated between their imperial mission and that of being local actors in the colonies. What is more, through their political functions within imperial society, as well as their practical experience in the colonies, they became 'cultural brokers'⁹ who determined the definition and implementation of difference in many decisive ways. What was to be understood by race, nation, the colonial state or civilization in the colonies could not simply be dictated by decision-makers in Europe, but was, more often than not, drafted and negotiated by European elites in the colonies.¹⁰ The making of imperial women and men worked centrally through the 'mapping of difference', i.e., 'the constant discursive work of creating, bringing into being, or reworking these hieratic categories'.¹¹ Throughout the history of modern empires these categories were shifting in their meaning, having temporarily acquired central places in the colonial as well as anti-colonial discourse, and then having often disappeared again altogether. Europeans in the colonies were important co-authors of these benchmarks for difference and thus co-determined the intellectual backbone of imperial orders.

Experiencing space and the mapping of difference

In what follows, I discuss select facets of Benoy Kumar Sarkar's scientific and political career, as well as his private life, in order to advance the agenda of the new imperial history. Clearly, there is a deficit so far in analysing 'non-white' biographies and their relevance for imperial history. Apart from some noteworthy exceptions,¹² the imperial biographies discussed more in depth are almost exclusively white. This is surprising as the network conceptualization of empires with its focus on patterns of transnational exchange, translation and nodal forms of communication would actually suggest otherwise. A closer look at 'non-white' biographies is thus not merely a question of historiographical 'fairness' or 'balance', but a theoretical necessity to better understand how concrete experience of space within and across empires influenced the perception of difference. Sarkar's temporary migration beyond the British Empire not only shaped the way he located Bengal and India in the world, but also how he challenged imperial constructions of racial difference through models and institutions of connectivity and exchange.

Sarkar was born and brought up under the British-Indian Bengal Presidency, and as a young man became involved in anti-colonial education reform. Right after the outbreak of the First World War he left India for 11 years, which he mainly spent in Europe, the United States and various Asian countries. After his return to British India in 1925, Sarkar became a leading intellectual in Bengal's academic landscape and enjoyed significant influence over his colleagues and students – among them many imperial careerists – as well as among Indian nationalists more generally. As I will mainly concentrate on Sarkar's life and work around the Great War and his return to India, I am particularly interested in how far the (British) Empire was a space of opportunity and constraint in his anti-imperial biography.¹³ What is more, his mobility was not restricted to intra-imperial movement or crossing borders into other empires, but Sarkar consciously left imperial space altogether to escape from warfare, colonial censorship and surveillance. Among other destinations he migrated temporarily to the United States and Germany in order to develop his ideas and personal networks to facilitate nationalism and what he considered India's civilizational emancipation. Empires

as opportunity structures look significantly different from the perspective of anti-imperial biographies, but are rooted in comparable enabling facilities such as transcontinental communication tools or travel options.

Opportunities of cross-border communication and exchange also influenced the mapping of difference, which the new imperial history highlights as central to any imperial project. Ann Stoler previously suggested that one should 'account for the *temporary* fixity' of powerful terms such as 'race', 'racial superiority' or 'white prestige' in order to gain a better understanding of the colonial state.¹⁴ As much as these categories were simultaneously fixed and fluid, their deconstruction, rejection and re-appropriation by anti-imperialists are usually left out of the picture. This is a heuristic problem because the historical impact of these categories, within an imperial context or outside, can only be understood through the dialectic of appropriation and rejection that we also find in Sarkar's argumentation as a global thinker as well as a conservative Bengali nationalist. In this sense Sarkar cannot be located within a strict dichotomy of racist imperialism on the one side and oppositional anti-racism on the other. For that reason, anti-imperial careerists who travelled the world are as relevant in our historical interpretation as imperial elites, even more so as both appropriation and rejection of racialized, Orientalized and other forms of mapped difference occurred on both sides.

Sarkar's global mobility and anti-imperialism are also more generally revealing in terms of empire and space. As Antje Dietze and Katja Naumann argue in the introduction to this thematic issue, the situatedness of transnational actors in hierarchical socio-economic spaces and their mobility across them are closely related aspects, yet frequently overlooked in their interdependency. Sidney Tarrow's 'rooted cosmopolitanism'¹⁵ is a comparable concept to understand what it meant for people to mentally and physically transcend the territories of national policies, while at the same time remaining deeply entrenched in domestic struggles over resources and meanings.

Scholars of anti-imperialism have recently argued that the experience of temporary migration to (European) metropolitan areas was constitutive for the simultaneous evolution of anti-imperialism in various colonies after the First World War.¹⁶ In Sarkar's biography, however, I interpret his experience abroad in light of his later return to India in order to understand how far his intellectual and political agenda of anti-imperialism had been influenced by the 11 years abroad. It is hereby important to keep in mind that Sarkar did not become an anti-imperialist abroad but already left India with the strong conviction that European colonialism was fundamentally illegitimate. Therefore, leaving British imperial space was in his case more an instrument to sharpen and internationalize anti-imperialism rather than its social precondition. In other words, the combination of his migration experience and his return to his context of origin is the central moment in his global mobility that determined his further career and lay the foundation for a threefold rootedness in local Bengali affairs and Indian national struggles, as well as in transnational exchange patterns.

In this respect, anti-imperialism is not mainly the result of domestic struggles against colonial repression, but appears as a cosmopolitan project strongly influenced as much by outmigration and life experience abroad as by return. As such, Sarkar was part of a transnational social field in which different networks of social relationships facilitated the exchange of ideas and practices.¹⁷ The boundaries of these networks were not identical with national or imperial borders but corresponded with the scale of individual migration experience as

well as the context of someone's origin. In this way, the transnational social field connected domestic and international changes and integrated them into a single framework.

For the analysis of anti-imperial biographies this results in two tasks: understanding the evolution and impact of these networks; and, equally important, asking how far historical actors have themselves been aware that they were part of such a social field and what this meant for their understanding of imperialism as a global challenge.¹⁸ Sarkar's – often contradictory – efforts to challenge the imperial grammar of difference allow for a closer look at both of these tasks. I thereby limit myself to three predominant motifs in his anti-imperialism: imperial racism; the idea of the Orient; and education.

Contesting imperial racism

The first period of Sarkar's intellectual and political engagement in Bengal coincided with the decade between the launch of the Swadeshi movement and the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 and the outbreak of the First World War in the summer of 1914.¹⁹ From a global perspective these years fell into a turbulent period dominated by tectonic shifts in the established political and normative order. Between 1870 and 1914 a new wave of imperialism integrated additional parts of tropical humanity into the colonial world system. This was a period of large-scale economic crises, nearly permanent warfare, and devastating famines and epidemics in India and elsewhere with a total death toll of more than 30 million people.²⁰ One consequence of these disasters was rising discontent with, and open resistance against, European rule in various world regions.

In Europe, the interplay of these developments enhanced the demand for new social theories that could not only explain what people were experiencing, but which could also provide a new normative foundation for society and the state, as well as international order more generally. Social Darwinism, eugenics and theories of race hierarchies were among those theories that rapidly globalized.²¹ Although it might be true that in the relationship between Europeans and non-Westerners, racist reasoning was actually less important than usually assumed,²² colonial elites did make extensive use of race theories in order to justify the continuance of imperial rule and to obscure their own class interests.²³ In non-colonized Asian countries such as Japan or China, race theories became increasingly popular among modernizing elites.²⁴ But also in the evolving anti-colonial milieus in multiple colonies the subject of race was in the air.

The start of the Swadeshi movement in 1905, which opposed the partition of Bengal and the economic yoke of British rule, formed a decisive moment in Sarkar's politicization. The boycott campaigns put him into contact with leading anti-colonialists of that time, such as Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo, who remained strong identity influences for Sarkar throughout his life. His wife, Ida, would later recall that he used to say about himself: 'My name is young Bengal. I am born in 1905.'²⁵ Right from the start, the question of empire and race was central to Sarkar's theoretical considerations on anti-colonialism.

In his early works, written in the aftermath of the movement, Sarkar was by no means unequivocal in his rejection of biologist interpretations of history. At this point he established an ambivalence towards race which he would retain throughout his intellectual career. In a book published in 1912 Sarkar laid out his interpretation of human history. For him the study of historical change was basically an effort to analyse and understand human existence in its entirety, as well as to uncover the eternal underlying principles of human

existence: 'Biology is thus the true basis of Sociology and the science of History. Founded on the science of life, History will be competent to formulate clear and definite principles about the course of human progress, the development of society and the evolution of civilisation.'²⁶ The consequence was 'an eternal struggle for existence in the universe' among human societies, an assumption Sarkar built on Herbert Spencer's notion of society as a 'social organism' and the evolutionism of Charles Darwin.²⁷

But Sarkar's book on history also contains a contrasting element that would also remain central in his future works. In addition to the competitive struggle for existence, Sarkar held 'all world-forces' jointly 'responsible for every manifestation of the life of an organism, so that the development, liberty, and degeneracy of one are inextricably bound up with the development, liberty, and degeneracy of all other organisms'.²⁸ Sarkar established a positive notion of interdependency and exchange as a central driving force of historical progress, which alone could secure the advancement of all. 'Inter-racial connections and mutual intercourse',²⁹ which Sarkar more or less used synonymously with the cooperation between 'nations'³⁰, are the result of human beings who themselves create their environment and their life opportunities. Although Sarkar's usage of 'race' would never become truly coherent in his writings, as its meaning varied significantly, he predominantly rejected two notions of race that sustained and legitimized imperial rule. Firstly, the assumption of insurmountable differences – biological as well as cultural – between Europeans and the rest. Secondly, he rejected the impossibility of cooperation between Europeans and others on an equal footing as a result of civilizational hierarchies.

Sarkar's views on racial discrimination sharpened when he left India in 1914 for Europe and the United States. By then, Sarkar was a well-established scholar as well as political activist in Bengal. As the war gained momentum in Europe and Asia, the British authorities in New Delhi and London were closely observing Sarkar's travels, as well as the formation of a truly global network of Indian anti-colonialists, of which he was a part.³¹ This network connected various Western and Asian metropolitan cities including London, Berlin, Paris, San Francisco and other US-American cities, Shanghai, Canton, Hong Kong, Singapore, Saigon and Tokyo. Proliferating surveillance and policing by imperial authorities on the eve of and during the Great War to repress such forms of cooperation had the adverse effect. They reinforced a sense of shared victimhood among those monitored and persecuted and in this way even strengthened transnational anti-imperialism in these cities.³² Together with other leading anti-imperialists such as Lajpat Rai, Rashbehari Bose, Taraknath Das, Shyamji Krishnavarma, Rabindranath Tagore or Sudhindra Bose, Benoy Sarkar played an important role as a coordinator, communicator and ideologue in an otherwise very heterogeneous social field of cosmopolitan anti-colonialists.

Beyond these Indian circles Sarkar's brief travels to cities in China and Japan in 1915 and 1916 enabled him to set up a more Pan-Asian network, which included some leading Chinese nationalists and Japanese anarchists.³³ But it was his stays in the United States between 1914 and 1915 and between 1916 and 1920 that had a significant impact on his intellectual development. Together with Sarkar, a number of other Indian activists went to the United States around the First World War, either for brief visits or long-term stays so as to escape from war-related censorship and surveillance in British India, as well as to benefit from the rich academic life of the United States. Among the most striking experiences for many of them was the omnipresent racial segregation. Lajpat Rai, for example, who joined Sarkar on the steamer from England to America, was utterly shocked by the aggressiveness

and consequent implementation of racial segregation in US-American cities.³⁴ Sarkar made similar observations, which he extensively commented on in his writings during that period, and inevitably connected them with his views on global imperialism.

Before he started his work in New York and other places, Sarkar met his future wife Ida on the steamer to America. Born in Innsbruck in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in 1892, Ida was on her way to the branch of her family across the Atlantic Ocean to escape economic hardship at home. In her autobiography, originally written in German, Ida describes how she met Sarkar for the first time at the dining table on board. She found a 'silent, quiet and reserved' but at the same time 'kind and sympathetic' man with a 'burning sense of self-sacrifice and patriotism'.³⁵ The conversation between them immediately became political when Sarkar impressed Ida with stories about India's freedom struggle, tortured freedom fighters and the suffering 'poor and backward'.³⁶ In Ida's descriptions Benoy Sarkar comes across as a man passionate about cultural, religious and linguistic differences with an almost insatiable curiosity about everything alien and different to himself. Several years later, in 1922, when Sarkar and Ida returned to Europe together, he insisted on a double wedding, a Christian one in Vienna and a Hindu one in Berlin, to respect both of their cultural backgrounds. Also their daughter, Indira, born in South Tyrol in 1925, was brought up in a spirit of 'inter-racial' exchange, which both of her parents seemed to have regarded as crucial to their personal lives.

During the years in the United States, Sarkar lectured extensively in New York, Berkeley, Stanford and other universities. His writings advanced rapidly and racial discrimination was one of the foremost issues that he analysed. Since US authorities had reinforced their anti-Asian immigration regulations after 1907 and had gradually barred Japanese and Koreans from entering the country, open discrimination against people with Asian origin within the United States also increased in frequency.³⁷ From this period in the United States, Sarkar's writings on racial discrimination against 'Orientals' are striking insofar as they do not systematically deconstruct the assumption of race and racial orders, but mainly criticize the value judgements that came along with them.

In relation to the open harassment and discrimination of Japanese, Chinese and other Asian labourers, for example, Sarkar did not deny the relevance of race as a civilizational distinction between Americans and Asians. What he rejected, though, was the combination of racial identity with pejorative cultural descriptions and moral stereotyping. To his American readers he argued that European immigrants were as uneducated, superstitious and filthy as immigrants from Asia, but that the latter were received with discriminatory employment conditions and open disrespect.³⁸ What is more, only Asians were openly regarded as 'unassimilable'.³⁹

In relation to the global order, Sarkar rejected the doctrine that there were permanently superior races in world history. Once again, this interpretation did not exclude the existence of races and their temporary superiority. Around the time of the Russian Revolution in November 1917, Sarkar wrote that white supremacy was 'the most universally accepted postulate in the thought of Europe and America'.⁴⁰ In his view nothing could, however, be more historically wrong. Sarkar defended the history of the 'Orient' not only as equal to the West in racial terms, but he also claimed the 'Orient's' supremacy throughout the Middle Ages and the early-modern period: 'Whatever pseudo-history may be taught in the schools and colleges of Europe and America, among the Orientals themselves the memory of their own military superiority is a potent factor in their modern consciousness'.⁴¹ In

other texts published after the First World War he referred to Ludwig Gumplowicz's book 'Der Rassenkampf' (Struggle of the Races) from 1905. In this book, Gumplowicz takes up the Hobbesian idea of a 'Naturzustand' (State of Nature), in which states and races quasi 'naturally' fight each other. Sarkar repeatedly argued that this was also true for India, where even under the British, political unity remained a 'myth'.⁴²

In his later career back in India, Sarkar remained influenced by the developments of racism and authoritarianism abroad, but his focus shifted from the United States to Europe. Due to his conservative outlook he consequently rejected any notion of social revolution and instead wanted to restore an 'original' collective identity of 'Orientals'. This made him receptive to political concepts of a strong state with a strong social agenda in favour of the marginalized and at the same time provided him with a clear mission to fight racial degradation.

Sarkar was particularly familiar with the political developments in Germany. After the First World War Germany became a preferred destination and model case for Indian intellectuals and their concerted efforts to revolt against the nineteenth-century British-dominated world order. Among European societies, Germany with its universities and international intellectual networks appeared as the most promising candidate for the dawn of a post-British era.⁴³ After his first lecture tours to various German universities between 1921 and 1923, Sarkar repeatedly returned to Central Europe including Germany, Austria and Italy. Closely, and at times enthusiastically, he followed the rise of Mussolini as he interpreted early fascism as a pioneer model for reinvigorated national confidence.⁴⁴ However, his own ideas on nationalism and the rise of Asia also found early admirers in Central Europe. Sarkar's essay on the 'Futurism of Young Asia' had already been exceptionally well received in 1922/23. His prominent reviewer was Karl Ernst Haushofer at Munich University, whose ideas on geopolitics and 'Lebensraum' (living space) had a strong impact on principal Nazi leaders such as Rudolf Hess and Adolf Hitler in the early 1920s. Haushofer was impressed by Sarkar's encouraging comments on the rising national ideals in several Asian societies including China and India, as well as on Pan-Asian concepts. In particular, Sarkar's sharp contrasting of Asian nationalism and Pan-Asianism with 'Eur-American tendencies' formed 'the most magnificent of all presentations from the Asian standpoint' known to Haushofer until then.⁴⁵

Almost immediately after the Nazis had come to power in Berlin in January 1933, Sarkar felt the necessity to explain the 'Hitler-State' to his readers in Bengal, which he considered a 'landmark in the political economic and social remaking of the German people'. What impressed Sarkar most was the militant nationalism of the Nazis, which in his view was indeed promising to 'get the frontiers of Germany rectified and the prestige of the German people enhanced in mankind's political estimation'.⁴⁶ For Sarkar, Hitler symbolized 'the moral idealism of a Vivekananda multiplied by the iron strenuousness of a Bismarck'.⁴⁷ Sarkar interpreted the strong anti-Semitism of the National Socialist movement as a legitimate reaction to the 'over-Judaization of the public institutions in Berlin' but expected the Nazis to 'ordain for them a legitimate proportion of the services not exceeding the demographic percentage'.⁴⁸ For Sarkar, the lesson to be learnt from the Nazis for a country like India was that the path to national greatness leads via strong governmental control of the economy and not, as Mahatma Gandhi practised, via 'boycott against machinery, inventiveness, engineering skills, technology or industrialisation'.⁴⁹

In spite of Sarkar's admiration for fascist movements in Europe, it would be a mistake to consider him a fascist or even a Nazi.⁵⁰ In the late 1930s, when the practical consequences of Nazi racism became more and more apparent, Sarkar continued to comment on racial segregation and discrimination in India and elsewhere. With new resoluteness he criticized other Indian intellectuals for their 'raciological interpretations' of human history and rejected any form of racial and/or geographical determinism.⁵¹ He was well aware that Stalin, Hitler and Mussolini were neither protagonists of world peace nor of 'the freedom of the enslaved nations', rather that they themselves were also colonizers.⁵² What fascinated him about fascism, however, was what he interpreted as the collective will and determination to change the fate of a nation that brought it back from the margins of mankind to the centre of global attention.

Sarkar no doubt challenged the racist grammar of difference that imperialism had established in Asia and Africa. On the background of his extensive travels in Europe and the United States he interpreted, discussed and analysed racial discrimination in India in a global context. As such, Sarkar became part of a global sphere of anti-imperial knowledge and exchange that advanced in times of the Great War and the rise of fascism. Sarkar's ambivalent relationship with racism in an imperial age is probably best understood if we consider Alastair Bonnett's remark that anti-racism is not the opposite of racism.⁵³ In various contexts of the twentieth century, the protagonists of anti-racism incorporated racial thinking into their own programme when they identified and rejected certain forms of racism, but at the same time made continuous use of the category of race and thereby confirmed a racialized logic of social relations. In that sense, Sarkar was an anti-racist who opposed imperial notions of 'natural' superiority, but who re-appropriated the category of race to serve the militant nationalism he thought to be indispensable for India's struggle against the British Raj.

Educating (away) the Orient

In order to put his ideas on a post-colonial India into practice, early in his career Sarkar turned to the field of education. After his return from abroad, higher education in particular became the preferred laboratory for his cosmopolitan outlook and experience. Similar to other fields of his political activism, such as in education reform, Sarkar operated in a transnational context.

During the first half of the twentieth century, education turned into a particularly contested field in several Asian colonies. The Dutch in Indonesia reinforced their educational efforts under the umbrella of their Ethical Policy, initiated in 1901, and opened Western education to a larger, though still limited, share of indigenous Indonesians. In British-controlled Singapore and Malaya ethnic Chinese, and to a lesser extent also Malays and Indians, secured improved access to primary and secondary education in English as well as local languages. Furthermore, in India the British undertook some efforts to design and implement a coherent education policy that had been lacking throughout the nineteenth century. However, these state-funded efforts could not remove the large-scale and systematic discrimination of non-Europeans in education. Most of these initiatives were either half-hearted, and thus grossly underfunded, right from the beginning, or they ran into trouble when the Great Depression hit the colonial economies.⁵⁴ What the colonial education markets did experience, though, was a diversification of education providers. Throughout South

and South-East Asia, Christian, Hindu and Islamic organizations, as well as secular reform movements such as Taman Siswa in Indonesia, secured a bigger share of the education sector and significantly expanded their educational infrastructure.⁵⁵

In their educational efforts in India, the British authorities had always depended on Indian support.⁵⁶ In 1905, eventually, the Swadeshi movement was launched to strengthen and expand forms of education that were different from British education. The fact that Sarkar experienced his political initiation in the field of education confirms a broader trend in the evolution of transnational anti-colonialism at that time. Education not only turned into an important battleground for anti-imperial ambitions in various Asian colonies after the turn of the century. The emerging global networks of anti-colonialists were also education-driven as they consisted to a large extent of young imperial citizens who went abroad to study at Western or Asian universities. In this light, Sarkar's educational mission was part of a broader project to emancipate 'the Orient' from colonial imaginations and thereby re-design its self-perception.

That said, however, Sarkar was likewise strikingly exceptional for his generation. Partha Chatterjee has argued that from its early phase of anti-colonial nationalism during the nineteenth century, India divided the world of social institutions and practices into two different domains: the material and the spiritual. In the spiritual, nationalists found their domain of sovereignty in which they could construct an Indian superiority in opposition to a materially more advanced British domination.⁵⁷ Sarkar does not fit into this pattern. He was not only critical about this constructed contrast; he also sought to deconstruct and altogether reject the dichotomy between a material West and a spiritual East. In his view, this dichotomy was neither historically justified nor helpful to decolonize the minds of young Indians.

What Sarkar thus claimed was not, as one of his biographers stated, that 'the East and the West (were) fundamentally different from each other with regard to ideals and institutions'.⁵⁸ In his comments on the Indian philosophy of life written in 1923, for example, he explained to German readers that the existence of mystics, prophets and seers throughout European history would demonstrate that after all 'oriental viewpoints and ideals' were not 'so fundamentally different from those of the Occident'.⁵⁹ His main concern was thus not radical alterity.⁶⁰ Rather, he looked for historical evidence to demonstrate the mutual dependencies between Eastern and Western nations but also among Asian peoples. Sarkar also rejected European sovereignty over the interpretation of Western history and theory and sought to establish Europe and America as research subjects that Indian social scientists ought to study and theorize.⁶¹ In this way, Sarkar intended to restore what he considered India's dignity and self-respect in the face of world history.

Particularly in his essays published around the end of the First World War, Sarkar was keen to illustrate how much mutual learning has existed throughout history between Europe and Asia and, more specifically, between Europe and India. His central argument thereby was that historians ought to undertake a more adequate comparison between civilizations. To juxtapose an enlightened and industrialized Europe with colonized India would be 'unfair' as it compared 'the East in its worst and most backward condition with the West in its best and most prosperous condition'.⁶² Through countless examples, ranging from what he considered republican and even democratic traditions in Egypt, Persia, China and Turkey to Indian ship-building techniques, literature and philosophy, Sarkar intended to

show that 'modern Europe and America do not date back earlier than 1870'. Before that time Europe was 'medieval and feudal'.⁶³

Sarkar neutralized the imperial antagonism between spiritual East and material West when he claimed to recognize a 'trend of latter-day scholarship [...] to detect, through the ages of history, the close parallelism and *pragmatic* identity between Hindustan and Europe not only in theology and god-lore, but in rationalism, positive science, civic life, legal sense, democratic ideals, militarism, morals, manners and what not'.⁶⁴ This neutralization was of course only partly consequent as he had to insist on other important specificities of 'Hindustan' and the heritage of Hindu tradition in order to secure his Hinduized notion of an Indian nation.

Before he left India in 1914, Sarkar had been a prominent member of the National Education Movement. To provide the masses of illiterates with access to at least a minimum of basic education, he strongly believed in informal education as well as the training of adults with the help of new schoolbooks to be written in various local languages.⁶⁵ He also introduced new teaching methods such as language training in foreign as well as Indian languages without grammar.⁶⁶

In order to conceptualize a truly national education, Sarkar formulated several principal ideas that should help decolonize Indian minds. Most importantly, Indian education should recognize a different place for religion in its curriculum. Whereas in Western education, religion is 'only one of the thousand and one aspects of humanity, only one of the many departments of man's active and meditative life', religion would be an integral part of India's 'peculiar race consciousness'.⁶⁷ A newly founded educational institution ought to be suitable 'by having reference to the social, political, and religious condition of the people for whom it is intended'. Education's foremost purpose was to foster the 'genius of the nation' and 'the spirit of the age, i.e. the highest and the best truths discovered and realized by the other members of human society at the time'.⁶⁸ Sarkar's educational vision was thus a combination of modern science and a (not less modern) traditionalism with a strong element of (Hindu) spirituality.

The international outlook in the organization and administration of education was already visible in Sarkar's pre-war engagements. He was involved in the training of Indians in foreign affairs and – at the age of 24 – organized scholarships for 16 Indian scholars to the United States for higher training in arts and science.⁶⁹ As a means of unfolding these organizational skills, Sarkar benefitted from his ties with the Indian aristocracy that remained strong and intimate throughout his life. But it was his 11-year experience abroad that transformed him into a truly international broker in education and professional training.

Immediately after his return to India in 1925 he was appointed Professor of Economics at Calcutta University, a position he held until several months before his death in 1949, when he left for a final guest lectureship to the United States. The details about his academic career after 1926 are not very well documented.⁷⁰ What we do know, however, is that one of his major educational efforts was to de-provincialize Indian science and arts by bringing the Western and Asian academic world closer to Bengal. One step in this direction was the foundation of a number of research institutions in Calcutta which would facilitate state-of-the-art research on international topics and theoretical fields, but also bring scholars in closer contact with political decision-makers as well as business representatives. The Bengali Institute of Economics, the Bengali Institute of Sociology, the Bengali Asia Academy, the Bengali German Institute, the Bengali Dante Society or the Bengali Institute of American

Culture reflected Sarkar's intellectual and geographical experience abroad.⁷¹ To participate in these internationally oriented institutions, scholars were urged to learn at least one Western language and acquire additional language skills depending on their scholarly agenda.

Ida Sarkar also reports that after their return to India, her husband established a wide network of research scholarships based on the personal contacts they had made during their time abroad. As a result of these fellowships, scholars from Bengal could get into contact with colleagues from various Asian and Western societies including China, Japan, Burma, Indonesia, the Middle East, Turkey, Egypt, Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy and the United States.⁷² Although it is not entirely clear what the exact impact of these international networks was, and in how far the research institutions have indeed succeeded in their agenda, these initiatives did transform the academic landscape in Bengal as well as in India more generally. Sarkar was by far not the only Indian scholar in the interwar period to criticize the provincial character of Indian academia as being largely isolated from Western as well as Japanese or Chinese knowledge production. In these ways, the transnational academic biographies of Sarkar and others had an important impact on the formation of a small but internationally oriented intellectual elite in British India.

Conclusions

The theoretical task of this thematic journal issue is to undertake a renewed effort to situate transnational actors within twentieth-century global history. Benoy Kumar Sarkar's private as well as intellectual biography provides some useful lessons to better integrate anti-imperial biographies into the new imperial history. What is more, Sarkar's life also demonstrates how different notions of space, rootedness and mobility have reshaped individual self-positioning as well as collective imaginations of difference within empires.

A first observation is that anti-imperialists like Sarkar drafted their ideas, wrote their texts and enhanced political activism not only, and probably not even primarily, as a reaction to changing local circumstances in their city or province. Even before Sarkar left India but in particular during his years abroad and after his return, his anti-imperialism was the result of his ability to think and act in a global context. As one of the leading social scientists in India during the first half of the twentieth century he not only developed a global view on political transformations such as imperialism, the First World War or the rise of fascism and communism; he also took the view of a globally integrated field of scientific knowledge. Although this knowledge field allowed for distinctions between varying historical contributions from different nations, continents and civilizations, he interpreted these contributions as feeding into a single knowledge field of global interdependencies. In a series of articles published in Calcutta in 1928, Sarkar once again emphasized his global understanding of the burning issues of his time. Accordingly, imperialism was the result of transnational networks and thus appeared as a global aberration that had to be fought through global alliances; revolutionary attempts in Egypt, Turkey or Persia were driven by comparable and selectively connected developments; and Chinese republicanism was supposed to have consequences for Asia as a whole.⁷³ The awareness of this transnational problem made Sarkar think, write and live in several spatial and political contexts simultaneously: he remained a Bengali lecturer and activist, established himself as a leading thinker of conservative Indian nationalism, and sustained his worldwide contacts and intellectual exchanges as the central infrastructure for his anti-imperial agenda.

Another aspect of Sarkar's biography points once again to the transnational social field in which Sarkar and his wife lived. In this field Sarkar exchanged ideas, strategies and resources in both informal as well as institutionalized ways. In his case, the transnational aspect was not limited to mobility within the empire, an aspect increasingly covered by the new imperial history. His transnational social field went beyond the British Empire and enabled him to leave behind the limitations British authorities put in place on 'colonial subjects', in particular during wartime. This mobility beyond the empire did not mean a contradiction to, or even the dissolution of, Sarkar's Bengaliness and nationalism, but was rather its reinforcement and gradual reformulation in the face of his experiences in the West and other Asian societies. In this regard cosmopolitanism and nationalism were not two antipodes, as frequently suggested.⁷⁴ Rather, cosmopolitanism and nationalism were part of a dialectic that resulted from global transfers. The theoretical conclusion of this observation is, however, that the dynamic of mobility within and beyond the empire, as well as the return into the context of origin, is not yet sufficiently theorized in our understanding of (anti-)imperial history.

Finally, personalities like Benoy Sarkar developed an impact on how imperialism was perceived in India, Asia, Europe or the United States by creating alternative channels for public debates and exchange. In her critical reception of Jürgen Habermas' notion of the liberal public sphere Nancy Fraser suggested the term 'subaltern counterpublics' in order to better understand how marginalized social groups 'invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs'.⁷⁵ With their high-caste backgrounds and privileged access to higher education people like Sarkar were hardly subaltern in the classical sense of that term, but to advance their political agenda they were working on the construction of counterpublics beyond the control of the hegemonic imperial regime. Historians of imperialism should devote more attention to the functioning and limitations of such counterpublics because they indicate the (non-) functioning of imperial governmentality. In the context of empire, leading anti-imperialists created counterpublics in numerous ways depending on the timely and spatial context. Thereby, global mobility and the simultaneous rootedness in local as well as transnational life realities were strategies to sustain such counterpublics and use them for oppositional political activism.

After 1905, when Sarkar became a key member of the National Education Movement in India, alternative curricula turned schools into counterpublics that provided non-hegemonic interpretations of imperialism as well as 'Indianness'. During the Great War, Sarkar escaped tightened colonial censorship by emigrating to Europe and the United States. His publications from outside the Empire reinvented the 'Orient' more generally and India more specifically in the eyes of the Western readership mainly to delegitimize British and other forms of imperialism. After his return to India, Sarkar published his own monthly Bengali magazine (*Arthik Unnati*) in which students were also enabled to spread their views on economics, world affairs and colonialism. The conditions for these anti-imperial counterpublics of course changed significantly over time but allowed their protagonists to invent new terms to categorize social reality, name political repression, and frame their nationalisms. A central feature of these counterpublics was to connect Bengali as well as Indian affairs with – in Sarkar's words – the 'world forces' and thus spread an understanding of (anti-) imperialism as the synthesis of local specificities, nation-building and transnational change.

Notes

1. Cf. Hall, *Cultures of Empire*; Hall, *Macaulay and Son*; Lambert and Lester, *Colonial Lives*; Gilmour, *Ruling Caste*; Lester, "Imperial Circuits and Networks."
2. On cross-imperial dynamics see Leonhard and von Hirschhausen, *Comparing Empires*. An interesting case study for such forms of exchange provides Schär, *Tropenliebe*.
3. Lambert and Lester, "Introduction," 8.
4. The neglect of space in modern social science has been discussed more in detail by Pred, *Making Histories*, 5–6.
5. On the role of (coloured) maps in empire-building see Bassett, "Cartography and Empire Building."
6. Ballantyne and Burton, "Introduction," 3.
7. Ogborn, *Global Lives*, 5.
8. Banner, "AHR Roundtable," 581.
9. Löhr, "Lives Beyond Borders," 11.
10. Lambert, "Reflections," 32.
11. Hall, *Civilizing Subjects*, 20.
12. Anderson, *Subaltern Lives*; some 'non-white' biographies are also included in Miles Ogborn's *Global Lives*; and there is a growing number of biographies on colonial "subjects" in a transnational context around the First World War and the interwar period such as Fischer-Tiné, *Shyamji Krishnavarma* or Manjappa, *M.N. Roy*.
13. On empire as space of opportunity ("Ermöglichungsraum") see Rolf, "Einführung," 9.
14. Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 206.
15. Tarrow, *Strangers at the Gates*, 182.
16. See, for example, the study of Paris as a meeting point for anti-imperial nationalists during the 1920s and 1930s by Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis*; for a global perspective on anti-imperialism at the turn of the century Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire*.
17. The term 'transnational social field' was suggested by Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller in their "Conceptualizing Simultaneity;" see also Glick Schiller, "A Global Perspective on Transnational Migration," especially 112, 114; and Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton, "Transnationalism."
18. On the role of identity and awareness in transnational lives see Deacon, Russel, and Woollacott, "Introduction."
19. Harald Fischer-Tiné has argued that, from a South Asian perspective, 1905 was at least as important as the outbreak of the First World War. Cf. his "Indian Nationalism and the 'World Forces,'" 344.
20. Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, 6–11.
21. Winant, *World is a Ghetto*, 107.
22. Adas, *Machines as the Measures of Men*, 272.
23. Bowser, "Racism in the Modern World Community," 285.
24. Cf. Dikötter, *Construction of Racial Identities*, in particular the essay by Frank Dikötter and Michael Weiner; and Dikötter, "Racial Identities in China," especially 407 ff.
25. Ida Sarkar, *My Life*, 64. Benoy Sarkar considered the events of 1905 not only as his political initiation but also as India's starting point for 'intellectual creativity or research work in arts and science, as understood in Eur-America or Japan'; cf. Benoy Kumar Sarkar, "Creative Youths vs. Uncreative Veterans," reproduced in Mukherjee, *Emancipation of Historical Research*, 29.
26. Sarkar, *Science of History*, 12.
27. *Ibid.*, 16. On Sarkar's ideological sources of inspiration see Flora, *Evolution of Positivism in Bengal*, 3, 38.
28. Sarkar, *Science of History*, 17.
29. *Ibid.*, 25.
30. *Ibid.*, 66.
31. Various examples of 'concerned' reporting from British authorities about these transnational networks of Indian, Turkish, Japanese and other anti-imperialists can be found in The National

- Archives (UK), IOR/L/PS/11/127, P 4037/1917. For British surveillance of “anarchist” activities after the First World War see *Report, Far Eastern Department*, No. 316, August 15, 1921, The National Archives (UK), IOR/L/PJ/12/45, 4731/21. To counter these networks the British demanded more cooperation across national and imperial borders including the (British) authorities in Singapore and Hong Kong, the Dutch in Indonesia and the national Chinese government; see *Sir B. Alston to the Marquess Curzon of Kedleston*, September 26, 1921, Enclose 1 in No. 1, p. 15, The National Archives, IOR/L/PS/11/183, P 8706/1920.
32. A more elaborate discussion of this effect provides Brückenhaus, *Policing Transnational Protest*, 2–3.
 33. More details on these travels is provided by Flora, “Benoy Kumar Sarkar,” 300, 305.
 34. Horne, *End of Empires*, 47.
 35. Ida Sarkar, *My Life*, 7–8.
 36. *Ibid.*, 8.
 37. Lee, “Yellow Peril,” 543–4.
 38. Sarkar, “Americanization.”
 39. *Ibid.*, 27.
 40. Sarkar, *Futurism of Young Asia*, 522.
 41. *Ibid.*, 523.
 42. Cf. Benoy Kumar Sarkar’s essay “English History of India,” published in his *The Futurism of Young Asia and Other Essays*, 285–6; Sarkar, *Die Lebensanschauung der Inder*.
 43. Manjapra, *Age of Enlightenment*, 5.
 44. Flora, *Benoy Kumar Sarkar and Italy*.
 45. Quoted in Mukherjee, “Benoy Kumar Sarkar in Contemporary World-Thought,” 13. During the 1930s, however, Sarkar distanced himself from Haushofer’s writings on ‘race destiny’, which Sarkar considered as too static in order to grasp the historical dynamism of races and their interdependencies. Cf. Chatterji, “Nationalist Sociology of Benoy Kumar Sarkar,” 126.
 46. Sarkar, *Hitler-State*, 8.
 47. *Ibid.*
 48. *Ibid.*, 19.
 49. *Ibid.*, 15.
 50. For a more elaborate discussion and contrasting views on this question see Framke, *Delhi-Rom-Berlin*, 140–1, 188–208; and Zachariah, “At the Fuzzy Edges of Fascism.”
 51. Cf. for example Sarkar, “The Acceptable and Unacceptable in Bankim’s Social Philosophy.” On Sarkar and Social Darwinism see also Raina, “Translating the ‘Exact’ and ‘Positive’ Sciences,” 15.
 52. Sarkar, “Stalin as the Manager of Leninism No. II,” 315.
 53. Bonnett, *Anti-Racism*, 3.
 54. Cf. for example Ghosh, *History of Education in Modern India*; Suwignyo, “The Great Depression.”
 55. Lee, “Taman Siswa,” 41–2.
 56. Whitehead, “The Historiography of British Imperial Education Policy, Part I: India,” 324.
 57. Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments*, 6.
 58. Bandyopadhyay, *Political Ideas of Benoy Kumar Sarkar*, 8.
 59. Sarkar, *Die Lebensanschauung der Inder*, 1.
 60. I agree here with Goswami, “AHR Forum,” 1472.
 61. Sinha, “Benoy Kumar Sarkar,” 311.
 62. Sarkar, “Hindu Political Philosophy,” 483.
 63. *Ibid.*, 482.
 64. Sarkar, “Influence of India,” 104.
 65. Flora, *Evolution of Positivism*, 36.
 66. Mukherjee, *Benoy Kumar Sarkar*, 6.
 67. Sarkar, *Pedagogy of the Hindus*, 11.
 68. Sarkar, *Introduction to the Science of Education*, 54, 59.
 69. Mukherjee, *Benoy Kumar Sarkar*, 6.

70. Moreover, the otherwise excellent ‘non-biography’ by Satadru Sen has surprisingly little to offer about this part of Sarkar’s work. Cf. Sen, *Benoy Kumar Sarkar*.
71. Brief overviews on these institutions provide Mukherjee, *Benoy Kumar Sarkar*, 18; and Ida Sarkar, *My Life*, 68.
72. Ida Sarkar, *My Life*, 69.
73. Cf. Sarkar, “New Content of Sovereignty,” Part I, II & III.
74. Cf. Nussbaum, “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism;” Skrbis and Woodward, *Cosmopolitanism*; Vertovec and Cohen, “Introduction: Conceiving Cosmopolitanism.”
75. Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 123.

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